

Overview

Over-view

We started with a rather vague need to understand the phenomenon of collecting objects, peculiar way the British administrators were obsessively documenting everything from a stone, insects, plants, geography, geology, populations, economy, races and tribes, agriculture, crafts—even the Himalayas. I link the documentation of crafts and policies for exhibition with controlling not only the material culture but also the visual world and man-made objects that populate it. ,

The Over-view opens up new spaces for a deeper understanding of the Design discourse during the British Empire. I have shown how the British administration formulated design policies to control and exploit crafts and design disciplines. In the process, using Macaulay's idea about for creating 'Brown Englishmen' who defined and constructed a new cultural identity for the Indian elite. In due course, this Utilitarian design discourse took precedence over and replaced the perception of India as a glorious nation full of riches. Collection of objects, their categorization, display and their reporting in catalogue—contributed to making of a new narrative for the object and its new context. This was very crucial in constructing a new knowledge of India the British Crown could assimilate and consume, and give its feedback to the Indian Empire. The Colonial and Indian Exhibition was a major enterprise in construction of this new fiction of India as the major part of the British Empire. By acquiring Indian artifacts, the British collectors replaced production with consumption: objects were naturalized into the landscape of the collection and became "knowledge" about India.

Early British Orientalists or Indologists started to “discover” India in the eighteenth century and were able to generate momentum about recreating India’s glory in Calcutta as well as in London. In the early nineteenth century, James Mill’s utilitarian theory created a discourse projecting India as a primitive and backward entity in need for guidance and government by the *superior* British rulers. Starting with the Utilitarian structure as their base, the British Empire used Design Policies to justify their domination of India, both to themselves and to the people of India.

The Empire’s overt noble motive of bringing light to the ‘*heart of darkness*’ in India hid the covert motive of draining India of its vast resources and wealth. The British with one hand gave India her past, while taking it away from her with another. They created monuments for enshrining their ‘collections’. Stewart has showed us that the collection relied upon the box, the cabinet, the cupboard, and the seriality of shelves. Robert Venturi said that architecture is decorated shed. We can say something similar about the museum—they are decorated cupboards. The museum was determined by these bounded spaces that required to declare its essential emptiness by filling it¹. Ornament, decor and ultimately decorum define the boundaries of private space by emptying that space of any relevance other than that of the subject. The British collectors gained control over repetition or series by defining a finite set or by possessing the unique object. The latter object had acquired a particular poignancy after the mechanical reproduction: for example, the exquisite illustrations in the *Journal of Indian Art and Industry*.

¹Stewart *Objects of Desire*, p. 40

In my study I have mainly looked for three aspects of these policies: the making of the design policies, their implementation and their reception. I see the Indian colonial state as a theatre for state experimentation where historiography, documentation, and certification of representation were all state modalities that transformed knowledge into power and made India into an object that can be known and documented. The treasures looted, pillaged, or received as “gifts” exchanged hands, migrated to other lands, and were enshrined as heritage in the metropolitan museums and those in the colonies. India was not just called the Jewel in the Crown, the real jewel—the Koh-i- Noor was, and currently is, under the British close guards. Thus, India was objectified along with the British Empire.

Indian craftsmen who were taken for the CIE show in London, were treated as exotic objects by the visitors of the exhibition. The British treated India and its culture as a premodern form of its own industrial modernized present. This objectification of Indian arts and artisans diminished the stature of the craftsman, who was erased from the documentation process. They also removed the object from its context and presented it for consumption of the British audience. This documentation process and the objectification changed the way the Indian life world was perceived by the British as well as the Indians who looked at India through the lens of British modalities. Thus, we see how the British projected the negative image of India through their discourse about its chaotic disorder, its lack of ‘knowledge’, its moral deficit, its linguistic inferiority, its lack of documented history, its industrial backwardness, its inclement weather – all the factors contributed in creating a picture of India as a dark continent.

India was perceived in the British imagination as a place of darkness and the British projected themselves in this discourse as the saviors of Indian culture, who with the light projected through their rationality, logic and superior modalities of perceiving their environment, were bringing light to this place of darkness and were ordering the chaotic Indian universe into neat categories. It is with this impulse/thought process as their overt aim that they started the process of documenting man-made objects in India.

The next step after these processes was the exhibition of the wealth of the colonies in form of Exhibitions that were held in different kingdoms in India at first and subsequently in London, the metropolitan capital of the empire. The purpose of these exhibitions was to exhibit the wealth of the colonies to the visitors – goods of economic value, which would form raw material for the British industries, and the artifacts from different states of India were exhibited in these colonies.

In sharp contrast to this negative image was the wondrous wealth of the country in form of rich artifacts, textiles, and various man-made objects which challenged this image by its very grandeur and beauty, and which the British were tempted to appropriate for themselves. So, the act of decontextualizing the artifacts from their context was a strategy to deny/erase the rich heritage of the country. This cultural transformation caused a dual result —creation of amnesia of the cultural heritage and replacing the latter with memories of underdevelopment.

The British were keen to set up a New World Order in which the British Empire was to be the new Center. The Great Exhibition achieved this for London by putting it on the map of the world as the center for Industrial progress. The Colonial

and Indian Exhibition achieved the same status for India as the prime Empire in the British Empire in 1886. India, which was projected as 'always already' static, timeless and exotic, was available not only for plunder, but was also perceived as an object of study. It is now widely believed that museums, as artefacts for colonial governmentality and the regulation of metropolitan cultural practices, are both products and producers of modernity. Hence, exhibitions, museums, and archives are theatres of transformations.

By formulating the Design Policies for the colonies, the British were not just creating a new aesthetics and style to reflect and consolidate their identity. Exhibiting India and displaying it in the museums completed the objectification of India. Thus we can see two movements by which this was achieved through the collection's claim of representing India: the metonymic displacement of part for whole, item for context; and second, the invention of a classification scheme which defined space and time in such a way that the world is accounted for by the elements of the collection. The British had the privilege of suppressing and redefining the original context. We can even see the logic behind the blithe decontextualization in museum acquisitions. A gesture which results in the treasures of one culture being stored and displayed in the museums of another to create the documents / monuments, to return to Benjamin's epigraph to chapter one, to celebrate their barbaric / civilization.

My researching and collating of findings is also an act of curation that is similar to the British practice of surveying and collecting objects and displaying them in an exhibition or a museum. At best, my fragmentary compilation of these policies mirrors the fragments of colonial practices and documents.